



From Out Here: On the Teacher Shortage

By Jack M. Geller, Ph.D.

May 2001

It's surprising that in a time of such unprecedented plenty, our nation seems to run short of so many things. From gasoline to natural gas, and now electricity, we are constantly receiving a lesson in economics, i.e., the law of supply and demand.

In addition, if you haven't noticed, we are also running short of people. High-tech firms and health care organizations are painfully short of workers with the necessary skills. Due to the explosion in technology and telecommunications use, as well as the aging of our population, the demand for nurses, nurse assistants, computer programmers and electrical engineers has apparently outstripped the supply and has companies scrambling through the halls of Congress and our state capitol, seeking ways to address their shortages.

Then there is the teacher shortage. Schools all over the state — rural, urban and suburban — are reporting significant shortages of qualified teachers; and like other

industries, schools are seeking help from policymakers in addressing their needs. When it comes to the teacher shortage, however, the economic laws of supply and demand are providing an interesting twist. Let me explain.

It only seems logical that the demand for teachers should be reasonably proportional to the supply of students. As student numbers increase, so does the need/demand for teachers. However, data from the Department of Children, Families and Learning document a 4.3-percent statewide increase in student enrollment over the past five years and a 17-percent increase over the past 10 years. That translates into growth at slightly more than 1 percent per year. Clearly, such a modest increase in student enrollments could not cause such widespread shortages.

The next logical place to look for a cause is the supply of teachers. If the "pipeline" of new teachers coming from our colleges and universities has

narrowed or clogged, that could explain the shortage. But again, the data doesn't suggest that the answer lies there either. Data from CFL's Personnel Licensing Division report that in fiscal year 1990-91 the state issued 10,549 first-time teaching licenses.

Approximately 10 years later in fiscal year 1999-00 the number of first-time teaching licenses issued was 10,273, a 2.6-percent decline. So, if it's not the demand for teachers due to increased student enrollments, and it's not a decrease in the supply of teachers being produced by our colleges and universities, why is there a teacher shortage?

Well, it appears that the problem actually lies in teacher retention. In other words, while our schools can attract teachers, they apparently can't keep them. A 1999 study across all Minnesota school districts by Debra Hare and Joe Nathan at the Center for School Change seems to bear this out. Their study documented that over 70 percent of all Minnesota teachers that left the

teaching profession in the 1997-98 school year did not leave to retire. Yes, that's right — over 70 percent! To me that's a staggering number, and one of great concern.

My general philosophy on employment is that most of us who work are generally motivated by one of three factors: money, respect, or personal fulfillment. Apparently, to many individuals in the teaching profession today, teaching in our public schools fails to provide enough of these factors to warrant sticking around.

Looking at the big picture, school administrators and policymakers need to understand that today's labor market is fundamentally different from the market of just a few years ago. When my wife and I were going off to college to chart our future,

teaching, nursing and human services (i.e., social work) had a monopoly on college-educated women. Today, there are just too many opportunities, and therefore choices, for both women and men, and the teaching profession now has to compete with every other employer out there. Labor is increasingly mobile and all sectors of the economy are seeking one thing — well educated, energetic talent. Of course, the consequence of all this is that if you are not financially or personally satisfied in your employment situation, you explore other opportunities. And increasingly, it appears that teachers are doing just that.

So what it boils down to is this: sounding the alarm about teacher shortages is a little misleading. In some ways, it's like having a car that's leaking a quart of oil

a day and telling everyone that the only way to keep the engine running is to keep plenty of oil on hand. The truth is that at some point you have to fix the leak. While not easy, school officials and policymakers have to see the teacher retention problem for what it is and address it head-on. Continuing to focus on getting more new teachers into the pipeline may be part of the solution, but only a small part. Making teaching once again a respected, personally fulfilling and financially wise career choice is truly the only way to solve the problem.

(Dr. Geller is President of the Center for Rural Policy and Development at Minnesota State University, Mankato. He can be reached at jack.geller@mnsu.edu.)